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ABSTRACT

Several techniques and strategies for teaching reading comprehension, which have already proved effective in first language reading instruction, may also be used when teaching English as second language. The techniques presented here address the following issues: (1) background knowledge; (2) textual analysis; (3) metacognition and strategy training; (4) academic engagement time and group instruction; (5) reciprocal teaching; and (6) summary writing. Activities for building background knowledge include providing a prereading precis and teaching passage-specific vocabulary. Story grammars and text mapping activities provide explicit instruction about underlying text structures. Reciprocal teaching is useful in teaching reading comprehension because it places the responsibility for reading comprehension on the student. These are but a few of the strategies that are effective in reading comprehension instruction. Some general guidelines to remember when teaching reading comprehension skills include defining each skill clearly and carefully; providing for interaction so students can pool ideas and experience; and using a model-guided practice-independent/practice-feedback instructional design. The majority of classroom time should be devoted to teaching comprehension skills and the subsequent application of those skills. (Four figures are included, and 26 references are appended.) (MM)

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ESL READING COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Observational studies have shown that very little time is devoted to comprehension instruction in reading classes. In addition, there is a tendency for reading students to practice skills on their own and to determine for themselves how and where to use those skills. In this paper the authors present some techniques for comprehension instruction and some guidance on how to teach students to apply the readings skills they have learned.

Introduction

Reading teachers allot very little attention to reading comprehension per se. In a study of 40 intermediate grade teachers Durkin (1978-79) discovered that those teachers devoted less than .25 percent of their instructional activity to comprehension. The majority of time was spent on comprehension assessment and administration and assistance with assigned work.

In content areas like science and social studies teachers tend to duplicate the text. Gallagher and Pearson (1982) studied teacher-student interaction in science and social studies classes and found that the most common pattern involved an oral reading of the text with low-level detail questions. The second most common pattern was a teacher-student dialogue focussing on what the teacher thought was important, after the students had read the text on their own. The third most common pattern involved the teacher paraphrasing the text, after the students had read the text.

The two previously mentioned papers address L1 reading instruction. While we have no similar published observations of L2 instructional practices, we suspect that the same traits are also manifested in ESL reading classes. If our suspicion is indeed confirmed, then much of the time spent on reading instruction is either invalid or misguided.

Our aim in this paper is to present some techniques and strategies for teaching ESL reading comprehension. We hope that the information will help ESL reading teachers focus their attention on instruction in different reading skills and how they can help their students apply those skills. Our sampler--far from being exhaustive--addresses the following issues: (1) providing background knowledge, (2) textual analysis, (3)

metacognition and strategy training, (2) increasing academic engagement time and group instruction, (5) reciprocal teaching, and (6) summary writing.

Providing Background Knowledge

There is a significant relationship between a reader's background knowledge and his/her proficient text processing. When the reader's stock of relevant background is meager, the teacher must take steps to fill the lacunae. There are different approaches to building background knowledge.

One approach is to provide a prereading precis. The purpose of a precis is to introduce the characters in the text and to present contextually defined vocabulary. A precis also gives a summary of the problem and the events that lead to a resolution of the problem.

Another approach to enhancing textually-relevant background knowledge involves a higher level of abstraction and generality than the summary precis. Providing an abstract and general overview of the text to be read has its origin in the psychologist Ausubel's (1963, 1968, 1978) theory of meaningful verbal learning. Ausubel's theory predicts that a reader's processing of text material can be facilitated and enhanced by providing a cognitive structure of the material to be read before s/he begins to process it. An abstract and general overview is supposed to build a scaffold of cognitive structure which the reader fleshes out during the reading process by adding lower order information.

A third technique for building background knowledge is to provide an analogical tie between existing knowledge of a topic (i.e., a familiar domain) and knowledge to be gleaned during the comprehension process (i.e.,

an unfamiliar domain). This technique is a manifestation of one of the principles of reading comprehension--a reader must relate old, given knowledge to novel information. The process discussed in this paragraph could also be thought of as schema activation or schema acquisition.

If a teacher chooses not to use one of the previously discussed techniques employing topically relevant texts to build background knowledge, then s/he could follow Yorio's (1971:114) recommendation:

> Passages or readers should be chosen with extreme care, taking grammatical structures and vocabulary into consideration. Passages with a story-line should be chosen first; they will be easier to understand and will, in consequence, build up the reader's confidence in his ability to handle "the rules of the game."

When a reader's background knowledge is scant, a second activity is called for--teaching passage specific vocabulary. The first step in this technique is to classify the passage vocabulary in relation to the reader's knowledge of the concept or the word per se.

Graves (1984:246-247) has identified four types of vocabulary:

> Type One Words-words which are in the students' oral vocabulary but which they cannot read.
>
> Type Two Words-new meanings for words which are already in the students' reading vocabulary with one or more other meanings.
>
> Type Three Words-words which are in neither the students' oral vocabulary nor their reading vocabulary and for which they do not have an available concept but for which a concept

can be easily built.

Type Four Words-words which are in neither the students' oral vocabulary nor their reading vocabulary, for which they do not have an available concept, and for which a concept cannot be easily built.

Teaching Type Three and Type Four Words is the most difficult and the most time consuming. The text being taught is the only source for Type Four Words. Teachers may find word frequency lists such as Harris and Jacobson (1972), Dolch (1945), and Carroll, Davies, and Richman (1971) helpful in establishing the four categories of words for their students.

After the relevant passage specific vocabulary have been identified, the next step is to determine how best to teach the new vocabulary. A semantic field approach to teaching vocabulary has some precedent from learning theory research.

Mackey (1965:76) described the notion of a semantic field as follows:

> ....made of basic key-words, which command an army of others. The semantic area may be regarded as a network of hundreds of associations, each word of which is capable of being the centre of a web of associations radiating in all directions.

We recommend the semantic field approach to teaching vocabulary because Tulving (1962), among others, has shown that data which have been logically organized into semantic categories have a more accurate recall rate than data which have been organized in other manners.

The crucial aspect to a semantic field approach for teaching vocabulary is to reinforce the relationship between key words and related words at all levels of text processing (i.e., from word to discourse). Exercises might include the substitution of key words for related words and the

identification of unrelated words from a set.

Textual Analysis

There are several techniques which the reading teacher can use to provide explicit instruction about the structures which underlie texts. We will briefly discuss two techniques--story grammars and text mapping. The term story grammar is used to refer to internal story structures. It is generally assumed that story grammars are naturally acquired by the recurrent telling of stories that contain such structures. Given the fact that the notion of what a text is varies from culture to culture and the internal structure of a story may vary from language to language, we believe that story structures should be explicitly taught to ESL students in order for them to utilize such information for hypothesis formation and testing in future reading.

There are different versions of story grammars. For purposes of illustration, we will present only Thorndyke's (1977) version of a story grammar which has nine categories: (1) Story-setting + theme + plot + resolution, (2) Setting-character + location + time, (3) Theme-stated event and goal or implied goals introduced by events leading up to and justifying goal, (4) Plot-x number of episodes (cluster of actions in attempts to achieve goal), (5) Episode-subgoal + attempt + outcome, (6) Attempt-event or episode, (7) Outcome-event or new state, (8) Resolution-final result (event) or final state, and (9) Subgoal and goal-desired state (Lapp and Flood 1983:170).

Figure 1 presents a simple story and an illustration of Thorndyke's parsing.

(Put Figure 1 about here)

Text mapping is an analogous operation whereby the teacher selects key content ideas and represents them in a visual display, making explicit the idea relationships (Armbruster, 1979).

Figures 2 and 3 present a text and a map derived from Meyer's (1975) analysis.

(Put figures 2 and 3 about here)

We recommend the use of story grammars and text mapping because they focus the reader's attention to the text structure underlying the story. An additional benefit from these instructional materials is the graphic explicit connection between ideas which may have been implicit in the text.

Metacognition and Strategy Training

Proficient readers keep track of their successes as comprehension proceeds. They continue to progress through the text as long as they comprehend. When comprehension ceases, the good reader stops or takes some remedial action. The process of keeping track of success in reading comprehension is referred to as the metacognitive activity of comprehension monitoring. Students can be trained to use different strategies in their reading classes.

One suggestion is to give alternative introductions, prior to reading the assigned text and have the students perform the following tasks:

> (1) Relate what they [know] (from their prior knowledge) about what to do in circumstances like those the upcoming story characters would experience, and (2) predict what the story protagonist would do when confronted with these critical

> situations from the to-be-read story, and (3) write down their prior knowledge answers on one sheet of paper, their prediction on a second, and then weave the two together to establish the metaphor that reading involves weaving together what one knows with what is in a text. They then read the story to compare their predictions with what actually occurred (Pearson and Gallagher 1983:330).

Raphael and Pearson (1982) suggest another instructional strategy to help students monitor with awareness when attending to inference and literal questions. Students are taught to generate the following types of answers: (1) textually explicit answers which are derived from the same text sentence from which the question was generated and labelled RIGHT THERE, (2) textually implicit answers which are derived from a text sentence different from the one from which the question was derived and labelled THINK AND SEARCH, and (3) scriptally implicit answers which are derived from the reader's own background knowledge and labelled ON MY OWN. The teacher asks the students to identify which of the three strategies they had used to answer each question. The point of such instruction is to make students aware that the answers to comprehension questions can be answered from both text knowledge and background knowledge.

Some words of caution about the use of metacognitive strategies are in order. Reading should always take precedent over reading strategies. Before any strategy work is begun, students should be given the opportunity to read as much as possible. Often readers are aware of and actively plan and select strategies to use when they encounter comprehension difficulties; however, it is not clear that metacognitive activities are always deliberate.

Good readers and poor readers process text differently, and good readers may not need to stop and think about what they should do if they are not comprehending. They may only need reflect consciously on their misunderstanding and plan how to resolve it when their comprehension difficulties are serious. Poor readers, on the other hand, may not realize when they do not understand, or if they are conscious of their misunderstanding, they may not know how to deal with the problem. It is probably helpful to have poor readers constantly monitor their comprehension of the text. Certainly all beginning ESL readers, regardless of their age, are more like poor readers than good readers. Thus, we can help beginning readers and advanced but poor readers with metacognitive strategies, but such strategies should be secondary to reading itself.

Increasing Academic Engagement Time and Group Instruction

Rosenshine (1979) found that academic engagement time and group instruction affect student learning. The rate of students' academic engagement is higher when they are being supervised by a teacher than when they are working independently. A problem arises when only the teacher or an individual student is allowed to speak at a time. All others must orient silently to the speaker to show that they are paying attention. Students who wish to speak must either wait or be acknowledged by the teacher. Students must be aware of the rules of participation (cf Coulthard, 1977).

Based on their research with Hawaiian children, Au and Mason (1981) suggest that minority and ESL students may be functioning with different rules of participation in the reading classroom. These rule differences

decrease the rate of student academic engagement time with the teacher.

In light of Au and Mason's findings, it is worth considering some of their suggestions to increase the rate of academic engagement time. Teachers should provide substantial teacher-led group activity. What the teacher does with this time allotted for group instruction is central to the reading situation. Instruction in the small group should consist of controlled practice in a sequence where the teacher first models the correct behavior, then leads students in the response, and finally tests them to see if they can reply correctly on their own. With ESL students, some of the time is spent teaching turntaking rather than focussing on the reading component.

Perhaps one of the reasons why class management takes so much time is that the norms of ESL students' culture may not concur with our cultural teaching norms. Thus, they may experience a different tempo at which teacher-student interactions are conducted, different teacher controls, and different student interactions. All of these can affect the amount of academic engagement time spent in the reading class. Because we cannot be cognizant of the different cultural norms for teacher-student interaction, including the rules governing speaking, listening, and turntaking, we need strategies to manage interaction in the reading class.

If we are aware of the preferred teaching style of our culture, we can balance this preference with the learning style of our students. We tend to teach reading in the following way. After the students have read the assigned text, we discuss it. During the discussion, we tend to ask a question and then choose a student to answer it. Frequently, after the question is asked, many ESL students will shout out the answer. The

student who is selected may or may not give only the information elicited. Sometimes the student who has been nominated will not answer. Thus, American teachers tend to stress individual achievement. What is interesting is that students who shout out are undoubtedly responding according to their cultural norms as are the students who do not respond when called upon because they are accustomed to choral responses, or when singled out, they give a specific answer and no more.

Because all reading lessons involve instruction, the teacher must exert some degree of authority over the group to maintain the students' productive responses, i.e., these responses must be toward learning and not just toward verbalizing. Teachers can maximize this instruction by (1) formulating the questions for discussion carefully and (2) accepting the students' responding behaviors, i.e., students should be given the opportunity to respond independently, to receive help from others, to comment on, to contradict, or to complement others' answers (cf Au and Mason, 1982).

A portion of time must be allotted to accommodate for our cultural preference in teaching. During this time, students need to be made aware that this time is for individual teacher-student interaction. The teacher equalizes the distribution of turns among the students. Each student is given the opportunity to speak. Thus the division of discussion time with two distinct, but equal, portions--group discussion, directed, but not led by the teacher, with all students who so desire interacting, and teacher-individual student interaction time when only the nominated student responds--can accommodate some of the variance between cultural norms. In addition, ESL students are introduced to the dominant teaching

preference in American classrooms. By teaching students that we must balance the rights of the groups and the individual as well as the teacher, we can provide a situation in which, hopefully, maximum academic engagement time will be in operation.

Reciprocal Teaching

In reciprocal teaching the teacher and the students take turns assuming the role of teacher in a discussion of segments of the assigned reading. Reciprocal teaching has a two-fold purpose: (1) it teaches students how to maintain a balance of rights between individuals, groups, and the teacher and (2) it teaches students to monitor their own reading and comprehension. Reciprocal teaching places the responsibility for reading comprehension on the student rather than having the responsibility for comprehension generated by the teacher.

As with any reading comprehension teaching strategy, including reciprocal teaching, the teacher should adhere to the following procedure. First, the skill to be taught must be carefully defined. If the skill is a complex one, it should be broken down into small manageable steps. Then an instructional design of model, guided practice, independent practice, and direct practice should be followed (Rosenshine, 1979). In such a design the teacher (1) demonstrates how the skill should be performed, (2) gives guided practice by working through application examples, (3) gives independent practice, and (4) provides feedback by giving application information and correction.

According to Brown and Palinscar (1983) the reciprocal teaching of comprehension-monitoring activities proceeds as follows. Students are

first required to read silently the assigned text in order to answer the comprehension questions, ten being the maximum. Students should try to answer these questions from memory because this requires more attentive reading. As they read silently, if they need assistance with vocabulary, they are to ask the teacher for the needed explanation. They should not use a dictionary because this slows down the reading process. The comprehension questions are then given to the students, and they answer them orally. The students are then asked to read the selection again, silently, in order to answer other questions. When the questions are asked, the text is referred to. This is an important aspect of the strategy. Far too often, students do not search the text for the answers. They rely on memory or perceived memory for answers. This strategy can then be carried over for individual reading, i.e., when the teacher does not direct the comprehension exercises.

Prior to beginning teaching the strategy of reciprocal teaching the teacher tells the students the specific activities that their teaching will focus on. The teacher intervenes with one student in order to model her behavior. The teacher and student engate in a "learning" game that involves taking turns in leading a dialogue concerning each segment of the text. The teacher draws attention to the title, the predictions based upon the title and from these the relationship of the passage to prior knowledge. Thus the teacher models the dialogue in order to teach one student what entities to pay attention to during the reading and the teaching process.

During the modeling process, the teacher frequently asks the student to go back and state the topic and the important points and to make

predictions about the subsequent passages of the text. The teacher and student work through the selection paragraph by paragraph (or section by section). The student is then ready to be teacher. She is prompted to ask, "What questions do you think a teacher might ask?" Then the specific strategy is focussed on again, i.e., "Remember, a summary is a shortened version. A summary doesn't have detail." If the student is having difficulty, the teacher suggests that she summarize first and then form her questions.

Once the reciprocal teaching strategy is understood by the class, each student is given the opportunity to become the class teacher. The adult teacher interventions become fewer; they serve the purpose of orienting the student teacher and the class to focus on the specific strategy. Students are supposed to see the relationship between the teaching role and their own individualized reading.

In summary, reciprocal teaching entails the following steps: (1) students read silently, (2) the adult teacher asks comprehension questions about the selection--all questions are related to specific strategies, (3) the adult teacher models the student teacher so that the class can understand the teaching process, (4) the student teachers are responsible for comprehension questions on a given selection, (5) the group process of teaching is carried over into individual reading--the individual is always in the teaching situation as she reads. It is her responsibility to ask the questions related to comprehension as she reads. The teacher no longer assumes the total responsibility for comprehension. The reader, by looking at the text and by asking questions during the reading process, learns to be responsible for meaning.

(Put Figure 4 about here)

In the preceding paragraphs we have mentioned the varying proportions of teacher and student responsibility for mastering a particular reading skill. Pearson and Gallagher (1983) have formulated a model of instruction (Figure 4) which depicts a continuum of responsibility from total teacher to total student. This particular model catches the essence of the goal of reciprocal teaching. Pearson and Gallagher describe the model as follows:

> When the teacher is taking all or most of the responsibility for task completion, he is "modeling" or demonstrating the desired application of some strategy. When the student is taking all or most of that responsibility, she is "practicing" or "applying" that strategy. What comes in between these two extremes is the gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student, or what Rosenshine might call "guided practice." The hope in the model is that every student gets to the point where she is able to accept total responsibility for the task, including the responsibility for determining whether or not she is applying the strategy appropriately (i.e., self-monitoring). But the model assumes that she will need some guidance in reaching that stage of independence and that it is precisely the teacher's role to provide such guidance (337-8).

Summary Writing

The last topic which we address is the strategic difficulties in

summarizing texts (cf Winograd, 1983). Good readers are able to identify what the author considers important in the text through the use of textual cues. Even though they may find some elements of the passage important because of their own interest, good readers are able to pay attention to the main ideas. The goal of summary writing is to get readers to read as good readers do.

With ESL readers, summary writing is difficult because they often attend to the words themselves or to their own personal interests. Thus, ESL readers tend to read like poor readers; consequently, their processing load becomes heavier and heavier as they proceed through the text. They become unable to use their own perceptions of what is important. Low-level ESL readers' summaries frequently reflect their inability to use their own perceptions because their summaries are often mere copying of the text. It may be the case that low-level readers need this phase of summary writing; however, if they stay at this level, their comprehension level will not advance--they may continue to be word-level readers. The ability to identify important elements in a text is a strategic skill that underlies both summary writing and comprehension.

There are other points to keep in mind for summary writing. The time for summary writing should be limited because this forces the students to be selective. Watch students while they read. Do they underline? Do they make notes? Do they ask questions after they finish reading or do they only depend on teacher-generated questions? If they rely on teacher-generated questions, this gives a rationale for the strategy of reciprocal teaching. One should also be aware that the proficiency level of the students may, in many instances, determine what questions can be asked.

For example, advanced readers need inferencing; elementary to intermediate readers need comprehension via summary strategies. And finally, van Dijk and Kintsch's (1978) rules for summarizing narratives might also be germane: (1) select and create topic sentences, (2) subordinate subtopics, and (3) delete irrelevancies and redundancy.

We conclude our presentation with some general guidelines for teaching reading comprehension skills and strategies: (1) begin with simple skills and work up to the more complex skills, (2) define each skill carefully and clearly, (3) use a model-guided practice-independent practice-feedback instructional design, (4) make certain there is provision for self-monitoring, (5) make certain that the task requirement is unambiguous, (6) provide for interaction so students can pool ideas and experience, (7) build new concepts before students are asked to comprehend them including novel content vocabulary, and (8) provide a scaffold for integrating new ideas with background knowledge.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to present some techniques and strategies for teaching ESL reading comprehension. A secondary aim was to draw attention to the fact that the majority of classroom time should be devoted to teaching comprehension skills and how those skills are applied. Too often it is the case that students must practice reading comprehension skills on their own and independently ascertain when, where, and how to apply those skills.

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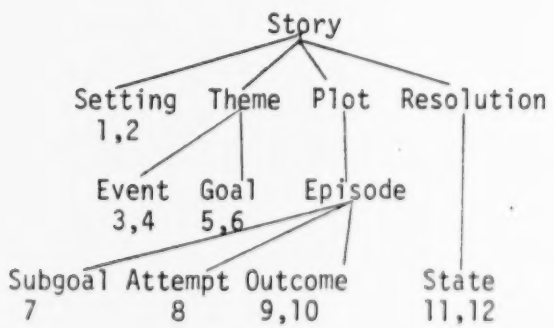
Figure 1

Simple Story and Its Grammar

Bernie, the Bear

1. Once upon a time there was a big brown bear named Bernie.
2. He lived in a dark hole deep in the forest.
3. One day, Bernie was wandering through the forest.
4. Then he spotted a big glob of honey on the stump of a tree.
5. Bernie knew how delicious honey tasted.
6. He wanted to taste it right away.
7. So he walked very close to the tree.
8. Then he licked the honey with his tongue.
9. Suddenly, Bernie was surrounded by swarming bees.
10. He had been stung by the bees.
11. He felt sad and hurt.
12. Bernie wished he had been more careful



(Lapp and Flood 1983: 169,170)

Figure 2

Text

The Garbage Collectors of the Sea

The garbage collectors of the sea are the decomposers. Day and night, ocean plants and animals that die, and the body wastes of living animals, slowly drift down to the sea floor. There is a steady rain of such material that builds up on the sea bottom. This is especially true on the continental shelves, where life is rich. It is less true in the desert regions of the deep ocean.

As on the land, different kinds of bacteria also live in the sea. They attack the remains of dead plant and animal tissue and break it down into nutrients. These nutrients are then taken up by plant and animal plankton alike. Among such nutrients are nitrate, phosphate, and manganese, silica, and calcium.

As the nutrients are released, they spread around in the water. But they tend to stay near the bottom until some motion of the water stirs them. As you saw earlier, during those seasons when the water is churned up and mixed, the nutrients are brought up to the surface. They may also be brought up by the upwelling action of deep currents. This is especially so along the west coasts of Africa, South America, and North America. Wherever there are regions of upwelling of nutrients, there are rich "fields" of plant plankton, usually during all seasons of the year.

So nutrients are kept circulating endlessly in the oceans, and are used over and over again by plant, plankton and whales alike. When a plant or animal breaks down the sugar-fuel it needs for growth, the energy

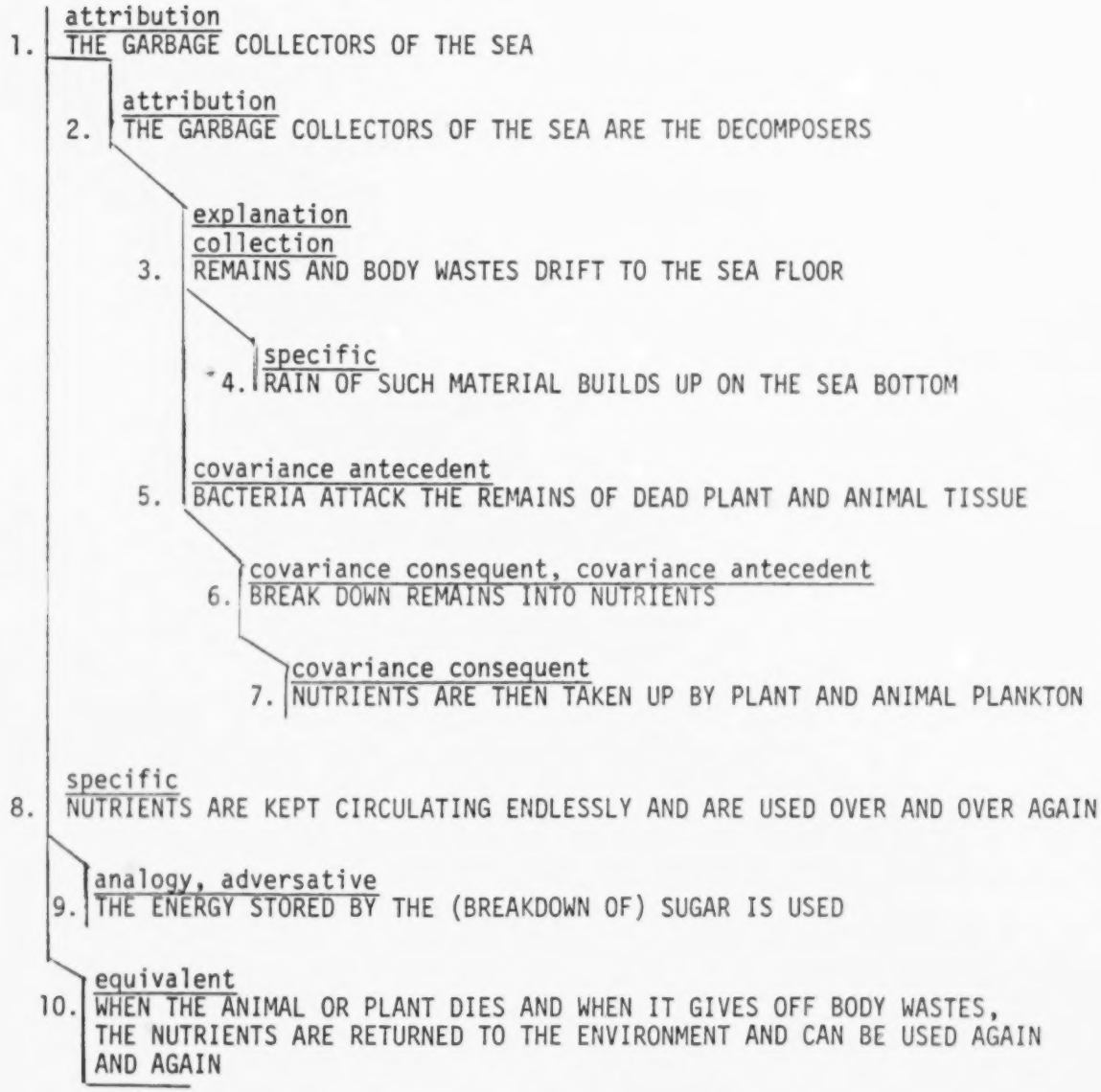
stored by the sugar is used. Some of it goes into building new body parts and some of it is lost as heat. This is not true of nutrients.

Nutrients are not "used up" in that way. For a while, oxygen, carbon, calcium, and other nutrients that a plant or animal takes in become part of the plant or animal. But when the animal or plant dies, and when it gives off body wastes, the nutrients are returned to the environment and can be used again and again (Tierney, Mosenthal, and Kantor 1984:144).

Figure 3

A Meyer Analysis of the Structural Properties of

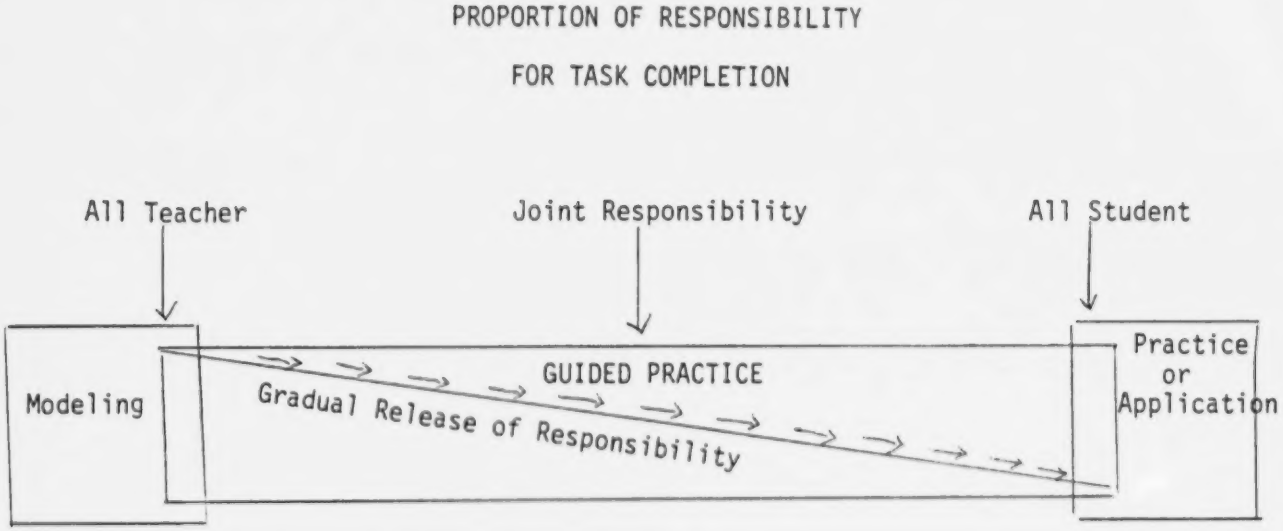
"Garbage Collectors of the Sea"


attribution
1. THE GARBAGE COLLECTORS OF THE SEA
attribution
2. THE GARBAGE COLLECTORS OF THE SEA ARE THE DECOMPOSERS
explanation
collection
3. REMAINS AND BODY WASTES DRIFT TO THE SEA FLOOR
specific
4. RAIN OF SUCH MATERIAL BUILDS UP ON THE SEA BOTTOM
covariance antecedent
5. BACTERIA ATTACK THE REMAINS OF DEAD PLANT AND ANIMAL TISSUE
covariance consequent, covariance antecedent
6. BREAK DOWN REMAINS INTO NUTRIENTS
covariance consequent
7. NUTRIENTS ARE THEN TAKEN UP BY PLANT AND ANIMAL PLANKTON
specific
8. NUTRIENTS ARE KEPT CIRCULATING ENDLESSLY AND ARE USED OVER AND OVER AGAIN
analogy, adversative
9. THE ENERGY STORED BY THE (BREAKDOWN OF) SUGAR IS USED
equivalent
10. WHEN THE ANIMAL OR PLANT DIES AND WHEN IT GIVES OFF BODY WASTES, THE NUTRIENTS ARE RETURNED TO THE ENVIRONMENT AND CAN BE USED AGAIN AND AGAIN

(Tierney, Mosenthal, and Kantor 1984:150)

Figure 4

A Model of Instruction



(Pearson and Gallagher 1983:337)